

Manifestations of the Self

- On the art of Shang Liang

Essay/Xi Winkler

Translation/Michael Winkler

[1]

I first saw Shang Liang's paintings in the summer of 2004 in Beijing. She had just graduated from the Beijing Central Art Academy Oil Painting Department Studio Three. Shortly after the graduation show, a friend and I went out to her studio in Jiuchang. As soon as the door was opened, a huge three meter tall piece, entitled *Summer* [2004] (fig. 1), was visible hanging on the wall of the studio. What was drawn was an outing-like scene with a few children playing in a stream. There were bright reflections on the water with a feeling of light like a mirror, and rocks were layered in staggered colors so as to provide the feeling of depth. From the trees in the background and the vegetation, to the folds of the clothing worn by the people, everything was clear and precise. The whole picture is executed with precision and with a bright spring and summer feeling. Next to it, Shang Liang stood with a humble expression, "What do you think? Do you have any thoughts about it?"

Ever since then, this kind of humility has been a staple of Shang Liang's expression. At the time, this graduation piece had the Central Art Academy Studio 3's influence all over it. It had a recognizable style and was in harmony with the studio's return to attention on daily life, realism, large brush strokes bringing the canvas a relaxed whimsy, as well as a high degree of sensitivity to color and accurate representation. However, Shang Liang does not care much about this work or even this period of works, perhaps because of this kind of typicality and how it is not yet distant from the traces of apprenticeship? Could it also be because she feels in retrospect that, when viewed from where her style has grown to now, the canvas appears too full?

Perhaps Shang Liang herself did not realize that, even then, her paintings already possessed a rare sense of ease. It is as if the painter had reached the desired effect on the canvas effortlessly (fig. 2). From the eyes to the brain is one process, and from the brain to the hands is another. Whether or not both of the two processes are smooth and untroubled will be clearly reflected on a painter's canvas. Like any ability, for a creator using painting, this representational visual media, in addition to hard work, a natural talent is required. I have always believed Shang Liang has this talent.

Many of the works of this period all have a natural demeanor. The characters are often found amid scenery, blending in as one with their surroundings. Although a focus exists on a certain reality, there is a poetic vagueness. Take, for example,

the series *Father and Dog* [2004] (fig. 3,4). However, it is precisely because they were painted easily and without great concern that she began to want to create challenges in other forms of media. At the time, she was madly infatuated with film, but the differences between the processes of making paintings and film are more numerous than the just qualities of the camera equipment. The filmmaker is not simply the one that holds the camera. Behind the screen that shows a smoothly flowing image, there is a complex system of interrelated operational processes. An individual creator entering directly into shooting films must always expect to suffer setbacks and conflicts, and the vast majority of these conflicts come from collisions between individuals and this operational system.

One solution is to attempt the operational architecture of a small experimental film. In 2009, Shang Liang visited Junshan Island in Hunan Province to shoot the experimental short film *Floating on the surface*[2010] (fig. 5-7). A number of young boys and girls, surrounded by vegetation on a deserted isle—a wide open space that was made to feel closed off and staged by the process—perform a symbolic, near stream of consciousness story. The creative process of editing this work into a final short film allowed Shang Liang to reflect on her own artistic practice as an individual and her positional space within the film industry's linked shooting, editing, and marketing processes. It inspired two transformative results: First, she returned to the Central Art Academy to the emerging domestic Experimental Art Department to continue her research and study. Second, the topic of the work would unconsciously become a subject matter that would extend throughout her future works.

[2]

Her 2009 short film *On the Water* marked the beginning of Shang Liang's interest in adolescence as a main subject of expression. However, at this point, her focus was on the characteristics of adolescence as a time when the subjects were not yet adults, like a larval period. Her performance also focuses on its behavioral characteristics, as well as its societal aspects. In *Don't tell* [2009], *Floating on the surface* [2010] (painting works of the same name), as well as in the *Love Lotus Pavilion* [2011] series, we see a group of idle young men and women, with nothing to do, seemingly in the eternal "dog days of summer". The future looks far away, broad, and has nothing to do with them (fig. 8). Close up views of the characters begin to feature, however they are drawn with even broader brush strokes. The girls have an almost vague countenance, and their hair appears blurred. The facial features of the boys is drawn the same as the trees and leaves in the background. Their hair is colored dark green, and the border of their hair blends into the trees behind them. At this point, her drawing begins to take on a new style, reducing details and colors on the canvas, while ambiguity of meaning outside the canvas increases. Her work begins to seemingly take on resemblance to elements of color and space employed in Chinese traditional ink painting *A Tale of*

Lotus Lover [2011] (fig. 9–11). The tones become more absolute, as the image is distanced from the scene and narrative nature of realistic painting, moving more towards more singular figures.

As a person passionate about life with many interests, Shang Liang has grown up and lived in the sprawling metropolis of Beijing since she was young, and this has shaped the artist into someone sophisticated, warm, and sincere to her friends. She has, among many hobbies and possibilities, always tried to find the creative direction that she can put all of her energy and passion into. This kind of personality also lets her continuously explore other possibilities outside of her central profession of painting. Some people can intuitively and clearly know their own path from the beginning of the creative process, while others prefer to explore and walk about in the proverbial garden, retracing their steps before achieving clarity. Studying experimental art has satisfied for her this kind of process of continuous practice. In these two years, she created a wide range of media beyond painting, including photography, short films, and installations. The main topic of focus also extended from adolescent life's temporal aspect to a broader human state, and discoveries regarding the human condition often link the body, the self, and consciousness. This has happened numerous times in art history.

Rhythm [2011] (Figure 12,13) is this period's representative work. It uses the movements of a mechanical device to mimic and explore the motions of the human body's joints. Real human joints have restraints and limitations to their range of motion, but, driven by electric power, mechanical axles offer unlimited rotational movement. The artist's meaning here is vague, and almost extends to the prediction of the conflict between man and the mechanical as seen in Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: the Iron Man*, but far from that film's pessimistic conclusion and feeling of terror, Shang Liang's work shows a kind of pure desire for the body to be freed of limits. In terms of cultural significance, the human body represents nature. Here, it then becomes compensation and contrast for the cold that the technological machinery represents. This work, using a simple gear and sprocket device, comes to represent the evolution and conflict of the self, concepts of connection of the senses and pure physical sensations, etc. or even the strategic positioning of the body within today's art world, therefore participating in the greater conceptual space between humanity and technology.

This period's paintings then, because of thoughts brought about by the above works, experienced a kind of internalization process. Shang Liang seems to have again realized another kind of challenge within painting: the challenge of the relationship between the concepts of body, self, and consciousness.

[3]

In the 2008 series of works entitled *The reflection of a Lie* [2008] (fig. 14), the artist, almost using black as the main tone on the canvas, shows a male head reflected in a mirror. However the face presented in the mirror is divided into

pieces by the reflection, becoming a fragmented image—This is a hazy metaphor, a character subject that is seemingly finding difficulty in self-identifying, self-distinguishing, or is still seeking self-integration. It happens that this period is exactly the time period where Shang Liang was seeking style and more dimensions of practice in creation. The reality outside the picture, metaphorically using the concept of reflection from the mirror, was cleverly stitched into the human figure on the image to show the contradictory state of the artist during this period.

It is also important to highlight that this work introduces an element that becomes an important part of Shang Liang's expression from this point on: the telling of lies. 'Lies' have been used by the artist to repeatedly to express a kind of uncertainty and doubt about reality. Here, she exposes to the canvas her own perplexity and indecisive reality, seeking clarification and self-integration. That the image is from a mirror that *will not lie* also exudes an expectation to confront real self-desires. This is the first time that Shang Liang would excavate this concept of the hidden self and reproduce it. Perhaps this is also why, interestingly enough, this work is often mistaken by viewers unfamiliar with the artist as a self-portrait.

I view this work as the beginning of Shang Liang's later period of showing self-awareness as an artist. It is together with the previously described concepts from *Rhythm* as the main thematic sources for *The real boy* and the following series of works.

At the beginning of 2012, Shang Liang began to draw the *The real boy* series. This is her group of works that is, to date, from concept to style, the most specific. This is a series of works about teenagers, willpower, adolescent bodies, and abnormalities. In most of them, parts of the teenagers' bodies and muscles begin to change dramatically. They grow hair or specific parts of their bodies become strong beyond reasonable expectation. These works are far from previous years' works that focused on environment, background, and overall expressive language style. On the canvas, focused and highlighted are the characters' figure. The backgrounds are monochromatic, and the number of colors that make up each image is greatly reduced. Each piece is reduced to three to five colors, and all of these changes show a trend of pursuing of a minimal simplicity.

From 2012 to 2014, these images of teenagers and young girls with bodily abnormalities were still relatively realistic. The characters' expressions on the canvas were often confused, as if they were just discovering their peculiarities (fig. 15, 16). This kind of confusion can normally be interpreted as the innocent teenager confused about the changes to their own body. It also stands for the doubt, curiosity, and even refusal felt towards entering an adult world symbolized by rules, finality, and certainty. (Shang Liang cleverly obscures the reproductive organs of the figures in the painting, rendering gender differentiation unimportant, (fig. 17). After 2015, these kinds of images start to coincide with the image of Italian writer Carlo Collodi's children's fairy tale, *Pinocchio*, with parts of the body becoming highlighted and more prominent and character's

spirit becoming more certain, almost as if gaining strength and self-awareness from the changes (fig. 18). This kind of bodily transformation that causes a kind of damage to the overall figure, as well as large amounts of details of the figure on the canvas being blurred or even neglected, is reminiscent of the style and influence of the broken *Belvedere Torso*. The broken sculpture, as well as the *non-finito* concept that evolved from it, was an important creative concept to Michelangelo and Renaissance art. Michelangelo, who did in-depth studies of anatomy in order to meet the needs of expression, was willing to break line with traditional accepted standards of body shape. His subtle usage of his knowledge of anatomy, his own observations of the human body, and the revelations gained from ancient Greek art together resulted in him making what was at the time a very challenging concept in *non-finito* body sculpture.

2011' s *Rhythm* is already a kind of partial expression of the *Belvedere Torso* broken sculpture concept, and the teenagers in these paintings fantasize about having physiques far stronger than ordinary people of their age. This kind of abnormal body part is irreconcilable with the other parts of the body, and thus constitutes a kind of broken or unfinished body. The lie that long nose Pinocchio hints at here subtly reveals the artists attitude, and in *The real boy No. 10, 16, 18* [2015] (fig. 19, 20), this kind of hint is already no longer hidden. The character uses his long nose to inject flesh and blood into the upper part of his arm, bulging the bicep tremendously—Clearly the illusion of being strong stems directly from lies. Here, Shang Liang' s unreconciled body concept is not mimicking art history' s *non-finito* aesthetics of incompleteness. It more corresponds to her earlier diametrically opposed thinking of 'truth' and 'lies' . The *The real boy* series discusses the predicament of the self facing the outside world. Must the self rely on lies to be established? And the self that we use lies to create, is it nothing more in the eyes of the outside world than, just as in the images, an unreconciled body with an abnormal deformation? The English name of these works, *The Real Boy*, lets the cat out of the bag. The teenagers in the paintings are like the lying Pinocchio, proudly facing the world and showing their muscles like a boxer, while inside they are full of worry, with noses growing long *The real boy No. 10*, [2015](fig. 21).

For the first time in these images there is a sense of conflict, but many novel structures have emerged. Perhaps because Shang Liang has always painted with such ease that she now reaches to a subject that is closer to her individual consciousness. She has seemingly further absorbed the traditional Chinese painting concepts of freehand brush work and open space, all while keeping distance with classical oil painting' s techniques and effects. She places increasingly little value on the hard boundaries of original colors and shapes and is increasingly willing to blur them. She seems to want to go in a more abstract direction, as most of the 2016' s new works are abstract paintings. The deeper psychological reason is perhaps that while trying this new painting style, she has started to develop an interest in the possible changes to the figurative body that she can create.

By the time of 2016' s new series of works *D520C*, figurative human forms have receded. The artist' s self-consciousness that wanted change and to contend with limitations has started to evolve into the current form of abstract geometric composition on the canvas, hanging muscled arms, and blurry hanging mannequins *D520C No. 2* [2016] (fig. 22). The forms of the outdoor environment and machinery have been replaced by geometric shapes and lines. I am interested in how Shang Liang continues to discuss similar topics, yet elements used in her images continue to be gradually simplified, changed, and replaced. The clues of this process, although seemingly hidden, are not hard to notice.

Abnormal bodies, puzzled expressions, investigation of lies and reality, the fading of the figurative, and the mutation of the subject into final abstraction: this is process that has accompanied Shang Liang' s search for self-awareness, identity, and realization as an artist. It has become a concept Shang Liang has been able to take from her life to explore and extend onto the canvas. I can feel her growing clarity and look forward to seeing what she, in future works, grasps or changes. Perhaps Shang Liang in the future will continue to take many new faces or forms to show her complex internal self. After all, as Amelia Jones said in *Self/Image*, “the objective world is always full of subjectivity”. Discovering the world is always accompanied by the discovery of the self, and vice versa.

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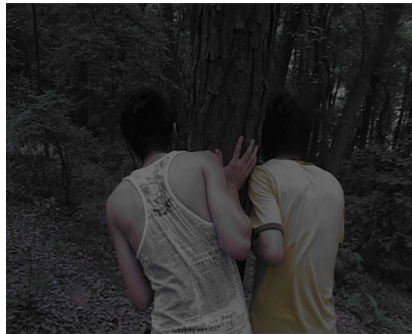
(fig. 1) *Summer* [2004]



(fig. 2)



(fig. 3, 4) *Father and Dog* [2004]



(fig.5-7) *Floating on the surface* [2010]



(fig. 8) *Floating on the surface* [2010]



(fig. 9-11) *A Tale of Lotus Lover* [2011]



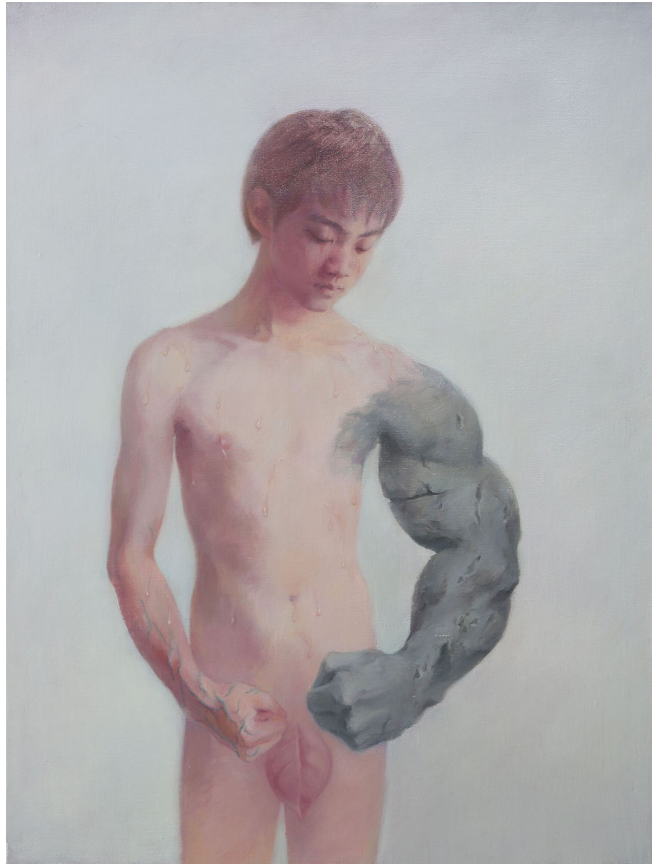
(Fig. 12,13) *Rhythm* [2011]



(fig. 14) *The reflection of a Lie* [2008]



(fig. 15) *The Real Boy NO.2* [2013]



(fig. 17) *The Real Boy NO.1* [2012]



(fig. 16) *The Real Boy NO.6* [2013]



(fig. 18) *The Real Boy NO.18* [2015]



(fig. 19) *The real boy No.15* [2015]



(fig. 20) *The real boy No.16* [2015]



(fig. 21) *The real boy No. 10,* [2015]



(fig. 22) *D520C No.2* [2016]